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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PREF](#) [KDEM](#) [IS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MINISTERIAL DECLARATION EXPECTED AUGUST
1; ANOTHER WEEK FOR FINAL APPROVALS

Classified By: CDA William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) Several Cabinet sources confirmed to us today that they expect the draft of Lebanese cabinet's ministerial statement to be completed by the night of August 1. Tareq Mitri, Minister of Information and a member of the drafting committee allied with March 14 and PM Siniora, told Charge and Special Assistant that the language on the "resistance" now in the text is much better than was the case in the 2005 declaration, and better than that in earlier drafts. "We did better than I thought we would and to be honest, I can't believe Hizballah let us include some of the language they did." He was particularly pleased with a paragraph near the beginning of the document that declares the Lebanese state to be the sole formulator of national policy. Finance Minister Mohamad Chatah, also a member of the drafting committee, told Charge earlier in the day that he also was pleased about the inclusion of that paragraph. Chatah noted, though, that the entire text allows "both sides to spin it as they want". We have included in para 14 suggested points for a USG statement if the statement after agreement on the statement is announced.

2. (C) Mitri outlined the schedule if the drafting committee approves the text today. It will be sent to all cabinet members for a cabinet meeting likely to be on Monday, August 4. Then it goes to parliament for what Mitri and others predict will be three days of speech-making by parliamentarians. Mitri believes the formal adoption of the declaration will not be completed until August 8 at the earliest.

3. (C) When asked about Hizballah's latest communique about Israeli overflights and its role in the drafting committee, Mitri said he believes Hizballah will not instigate another major confrontation in the near future. "They know they are negotiating from a position of strength and they are trying not to present an arrogant image to the domestic voting audience." End Summary.

Hizballah Language is "Better than 2005"

4. (C) Information Minister Tarig Mitri said the March 14 majority "got what it could get" regarding the language relating to arms and the "resistance". He said there had been very long and contentious arguments about the topic in

the committee, with Hizballah arguing for using the same language that was used in the 2005 ministerial declaration. March 14 argued that conditions were vastly different in 2008 and was able to improve upon the language.

¶5. (C) Mitri said that paragraph five or six of the declaration, which is near the beginning as "one of the most important affirmations," declares that only the state has the authority to formulate policy designed to protect the country and that this principal supersedes all others in the document. Mitri was also pleased that a phrase was included which affirms the Lebanese state's right to either "liberate", implying armed struggle, or "recuperate", meaning via diplomacy, Lebanon's occupied territory such as Sheba'a Farms. Mitri said that it was very difficult to add the second "softer" option, and this should be seen as a victory.

"Draft Will Be Finalized Today"

¶6. Mitri visibly grimaced when asked how the drafting process had proceeded. "Helping to write the UNSCR 1701 was a piece of cake compared to this." He said the process has been exacerbated by Speaker Nabih Berri's "lies" about the deadline for completing the declaration and also the public's impatience with the delays. In the end, however, Mitri believes this detailed document will effectively guide the government's actions on a wide range of national issues.

¶7. (C) Mitri outlined the next steps of the approval process:

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-- The drafting committee will meet later on August 1 to put finishing touches on the agreed-upon language.

-- A technical and legal review of the language will take place on August 2. After, copies will be distributed to the cabinet members to allow them to review and prepare comments.

-- The cabinet will meet on August 4 or 5 to consider the declaration. Mitri believes this process will proceed quickly, as most ministers are just anxious to be done with the process. (Note: Ministers may go on record with objections to certain portions of the declaration and we have heard that ministers representing Kataeb and Lebanese Forces are planning to do so with regard to the Hizballah arms language, septel. End Note.)

-- The declaration will subsequently be sent to parliament, where there will be up to three days for public comment. Mitri believes that MPs will use this opportunity to make televised speeches targeted directly to their constituencies to begin posturing for the spring 2009 elections.

-- The parliament must then convene for the declaration's formal adoption and "vote of confidence" for the new government. Mitri expects this to happen on August 8 if all goes well.

"Hizballah Communique Should Not Cause Immediate Alarm"

¶8. (C) Mitri told us that the recent Hizballah communique condemning Israeli overflights had been discussed in the drafting committee. "The Israelis keep giving Hizballah the perfect argument for the legitimacy of their arms to defend the nation's sovereignty. They point to the lack of response from the LAF and say that they are the only ones who can defend Lebanon."

¶9. (C) In Mitri's opinion, however, the communique should not cause immediate alarm. Hizballah officials had told Mitri quietly that they had no intention of de-railing this final phase of the government's formation. "I am inclined to think that they will be quiet until after the U.S. elections in

November. After May 2008, Hizballah is in a position of strength and they are being careful not to come across as heavy handed or arrogant, especially in light of the upcoming parliamentary elections in 2009."

Looking Forward

¶10. (C) Mitri's hope is that the National Dialogue process will empower President Sleiman. "We all want to see him fully take charge of the office. He is playing a very cautious game now." Mitri said it is imperative to Sleiman to increase his power base. "Hizballah is quite confident that it will win the parliamentary elections in 2009. There are a large majority of moderate and undecided Christians who could be mobilized around the right candidate. This is critical because all could be lost in the next elections."

¶11. (C) Mitri, an independent Greek Orthodox cabinet member chosen by Prime Minister Siniora, told us that March 14 is doing very little to prepare for the upcoming elections. "The violence in May produced a serious blow for some of the top leaders and they are still processing it." Mitri also echoed what we frequently hear - that March 14 feels abandoned by its international allies. Mitri, who served as Acting Foreign Minister prior to his current position, disagrees. "I know what happens in the UN and how the international community manifests its support. However, March 14 leaders want their allies to compete with Syrian and Iranian influences using the same tools. I tell them this is ridiculous. Is a nice country like Sweden going to step forward with car bombs? Will the EU form its own version of Hizballah to defend Lebanon? These guys need to get real about their expectations and move on."

Plans for the Information Ministry

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¶12. (C) Mitri, a noted author, said his wish had been to remain as the Minister of Culture. He told us that he was given his current post at the last minute and is still trying to navigate his way through the new portfolio. His predecessor, a Druze ally of Walid Jumblatt's, rarely spoke with the media. Mitri said he will attempt to fill this gap. He said that he is also charged with the management of the government's National News Agency. The Ministry historically has performed as an "old school" information body which "sermonized about the value of good citizenship." In the aftermath of the May violence, Mitri believes that these types of programs to strengthen the national identity will become even more important.

¶13. (C) Finally, Mitri said that he will also have a role in the administration of the 2009 elections. There is a law on the books now which regulates media use by candidates and even stronger reforms are currently being debated in parliamentary committees. Mitri believes that he will have difficulty enforcing these rules. "I have no tools to use against offenders beyond a stern letter and the threat of a protracted court case which will end in a minuscule fine."

Comment: Suggested Press Guidance

¶14. (C) We expect the GOL to announce on August 1 or 2 that the cabinet drafting committee has reached agreement on the text of a ministerial statement. Once the announcement is made, Embassy proposes the following points for public USG statements.

-- The United States congratulates the Lebanese government on reaching agreement on its new ministerial declaration. If this statement is approved by the full cabinet and the parliament, as expected, it will guide the program for the

new cabinet.

-- We are pleased that the ministerial declaration reaffirms the central role of the Lebanese state as the body that formulates national policy for key issues such as defense. The declaration also confirms that the state represents a full range of actors in Lebanese society.

-- This declaration was negotiated among Lebanese leaders who are part of the national unity government. We continue to support Lebanese making decisions for Lebanon free from outside influences. End Comment.

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